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Autumn crop management

Stop-start conditions

With concerns circulating among industry that growers might risk early drilling in a bid to avoid déjà vu, it appears Mother Nature has yet again demonstrated who’s in control. But could pausing proceedings actually be a blessing in disguise? *CPM* reports.

By Janine Adamson

One minute it’s bone dry, the next there’s a deluge. At the time of writing (end of September), some growers might have had plans to crack on and get drilled up. However, heavy rainfall in parts of the country mean for many, it’s back to playing the waiting game.

According to Hutchinsons technical manager, Dick Neale, pausing for a few weeks could prove no bad thing. “In reality, we’ve not seen the rush of early drilling that was anticipated – growers are aware of rotational issues such as barley volunteers and then blackgrass, which is only just beginning to emerge.

“So whether it’s been a management decision or purely because the weather has halted plans, there hasn’t been the wholesale move to early drilling which some were predicting,” he says.

Waiting game

Reflecting on longer term weather forecasts, Dick suggests it’s likely the next sensible drilling window for wheat will be around 10 October onwards, particularly for those in the East. “All-in-all, growers are in a better place than last year because many have been out conducting remedial work such as mole draining.

“Whereas they may have been aiming to drill the last week of September, once it’s stopped raining and seedbeds have dried out a little, it’ll be more around 10 October – that’s still nearly a week earlier than usual,” he adds.

Dick highlights that for those who drilled really early this year and already have wheat in the ground, it’s likely there’ll be a mixed bag of success depending on how it was approached and what the previous crop has been. But his main concern for the season is grassweed control.

“A few years ago blackgrass control was superb, but 2023 aside, we’ve started to see cracks emerge recently and low levels of plants sneaking through. However, the issue isn’t control of plants – we’re mostly achieving 90%+ success – it’s what’s left. Those survivors are tillering hugely in the spring and they have to be the focus, along with the spring emerging population,” he stresses.

The problem lies in herbicide choice and inadequate sequencing, proposes Dick. “We’re seeing blackgrass emerging much later in the season and we appear to be selecting for the survival of those plants.

There should be a more tempered approach to herbicide use with optimised sequencing through winter and early spring, stresses Hutchinsons’ Dick Neale.

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Frontier's Dr Paul Fogg says if seedbed conditions aren't right to ensure pre-ems will work, then they're simply not right full stop.

"As such, the worst-case scenario this year would have been the bulk of pre-em applications going onto early drilled crops. Luckily due to conditions, that hasn't happened. Even so, there has to be a more tempered approach to herbicide use with optimised sequencing through winter and early spring," he says.

And it's not just blackgrass – Dick notes greater brome pressure too. "Brome is flying out of the ground at the moment, so selecting the correct herbicide for the weed present, will be critical."

Seedbed conditions

Crop production technical lead at Frontier, Dr Paul Fogg, agrees that protracted grassweed germination is becoming a significant problem. "Even more so if you have chosen to drill early this year," he says.

"But it all comes down to seedbed conditions – if they're not right to ensure pre-ems will work, then they're simply not right full stop. It's important to not forget the basics of integrated grassweed control."

The temptation of early drilling plus a shift towards direct seeding and 'drilling on the green', means Paul also has concerns regarding barley yellow dwarf virus (BYDV). "Transmission risk from aphids is greater in these scenarios and with many having signed up to SFI actions for the first time this year – in this case no insecticide (CIPM4) – it's another dynamic which has to be considered."

In a similar vein, he highlights the importance of companion crop management which should also influence drilling date. "For those signed up to CIPM3 (companion crop on arable and horticultural land) and aiming to grow something like beans with wheat, sowing date will have to be optimised to ensure that action is successfully delivered in the autumn," he explains.

Paul points out that one success story appears to be oilseed rape. "There seems to be fewer cabbage stem flea beetle around than usual. With the hectarage projected to be low, no doubt growers will be wishing they'd drilled much more OSR this year," he concludes. ■

Lower CSFB pressure

In recent months, United Oilseeds has been leading the charge to revitalise oilseed rape production in the UK, following a significant decline in area. One of the major factors behind this decline, the company states, is the relentless pressure from cabbage stem flea beetle.

As part of its OSR Reboot initiative, United Oilseeds has established a network of MagicTraps – a monitoring tool from Bayer which uses AI to track CSFB's migration and behaviour. United Oilseeds has been encouraging members to contribute data from their traps, with 42 now in situ across the country.

Reporting began in early August and the overall data so far indicates lower CSFB numbers compared with previous years, largely attributed to climate conditions particularly the recent wet weather. However, as this is the first set of comprehensive data, it's challenging to pinpoint trends across specific regions, says United Oilseeds.

Even so, bi-weekly member polls and information from AHDB monitoring sites suggests a broader picture of reduced pest pressure, with occasional regional spikes.

For example, during the week of 4-10 September, a notable spike occurred in the East Midlands, confirmed by United Oilseeds growers and the nearest AHDB monitoring station. The trap data recorded 29 individuals during this period (with a 7-day buffer either side), but which still falls below Bayer's surge threshold of 50 beetles in 21 days.

Monitoring data and grower feedback suggest an overall picture of reduced CSFB pressure this year.

United Oilseeds managing director, James Warner, says the aggregation and transparent sharing of data whether from MagicTrap, surveys, anecdotal reports or the recently launched ADAS pest and disease platform, is vital in the fight against CSFB. "Reliable data will be key not only in fast-tracking approval for new chemistry, but also in ensuring its use meets a necessary threshold of pest pressure."

North Yorkshire farmer Andrew Pearcy is a regular contributor to the CSFB polls. "I'm fortunate to be able to monitor my OSR visually, but I've found the MagicTrap updates useful. Comparing national and regional trends is a valuable support tool for making informed decisions."

To join the monitoring network, visit www.unitedoilseeds.co.uk/magictrap

Last season's impacts

Grassweed management will continue to be top of Ed Ford's agenda this autumn, as he strives to defend against both blackgrass and ryegrass.

Up until this past year, he explains that management techniques had isolated the ryegrass burden to just headlands, but now the problem is starting to encroach. "While it's not much, we pulled 15 plants across a 16ha field. We know how competitive ryegrass is and that we're going to have to change a few things to ensure it doesn't get a hold," explains Ed.

For context, the 600ha Essex farm sits predominately on heavy London clay, is no-till and has a rotation which includes winter wheat, winter beans, spring barley, linseed, and oats. "Last year was horrific – as such, the farm is now the dirtiest it's been for 10 years," says Ed. This is despite successfully drilling all of the winter wheat area last autumn with all pre-ems applied, he adds.

"However, many of the peri-emergence herbicides weren't sprayed and come spring, it was so wet that we couldn't get on quick enough with Atlantis (mesosulfuron+ iodosulfuron)."

According to Ed, the farm's cleanest crops were the first wheats which received Luximo (cinmethylin) and a top-up at peri-emergence of flufenacet+ diflufenican plus prosulfocarb. Second wheats received a programme featuring Crystal (flufenacet+ pendimethalin) plus Hurricane (diflufenican) and Avadex (tri-allate).

Come early summer, Ed says he had to make some tough decisions and, given the high levels of seed return from this year, he has more to make this coming autumn. "Even with relatively high wheat prices we sprayed off 3ha due to unacceptable levels of grassweeds. That included the worst patches of ryegrass and unrogueable areas of blackgrass destined for a second wheat."

The recent hire of a 7m rake reflects a change in approach for autumn cultivations at the farm. "Although we hired it to deal with an accumulation of straw rather than grassweed control, it should help the breakdown of trash which will inevitably help to improve pre-em performance. Everything is being raked twice, once soon after the combine and again six weeks later," he says.

Ed also plans to grow fewer second wheats and is considering splitting fields. "I hate doing it, but I know it'll be worthwhile," he comments. Furthermore, he anticipates a reduction in oat hectarage, which he says is because of a lack of grassweed control options such as Luximo.

"Luximo performed well on the blackgrass here and notably well on the ryegrass at my brother's farm. It stands out in trials too especially when used alongside Avadex. Alone, it offers good control of ryegrass, in conjunction with Avadex, it's really good."

Ed concludes that with ryegrass populations increasing on farm, he has no choice but to get a grip of it by using the optimum chemistry.

Essex farmer Ed Ford is having to adjust his approach to grassweed management this season as a result of increasing ryegrass pressure.